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JEAN MOREAS.

BY WILLIAM ASPENWALL BRADLEY.

WHAT real relation have blood and race to the genius of the poet, and what do we mean when we speak of nationality in connection with art and literature? These questions and others of a similar character are suggested by a consideration of the career of Jean Moréas, the Parisian poet who died the other day at the age of fifty-four. We say Parisian and not French advisedly; for while Moréas was assuredly a Parisian by every quality of taste and temperament, he had of the Frenchman absolutely nothing but the passionate devotion, stamping all the work of his imagination, to the traditions of a literature that was his merely by adoption. Chénier was Greek on his mother's side only, while Moréas was altogether Greek. Yet of the two, it is no exaggeration—and certainly it is no particular praise—to assert that in exclusiveness of national inspiration the latter was far more French than the former. Chénier sought to compass something of the form and spirit of the Greek and Roman poets, and more nearly than any of his predecessors and contemporaries did he succeed in realizing that classical ideal which, and not the continuity of a national tradition, was the conscious aim of the age. His poetry is simple and direct in its expression, clear and harmonious in its design. That of Moréas, on the contrary, in all but its latest phase, is involved, complicated and obscure. He spurned the models of antiquity that were his peculiar heritage even more than they were Chénier's. He, too, made his return to the past, but it was to the past of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, of Thibaut de Champagne and Ronsard, rather than that of Theocritus and Simonides. Of course he knew the poets of his own race too, but their influence was felt by him indirectly, at second hand. As one of the best of his critics, M. André Beaunier, has said:

"He sees antiquity only across the Renaissance. . . . In the soul of the Greek and of the scholar, mythology has left memories of enchantment, and the very names of the learned daughters of Nerea have for him the charm of the divinest evocations. . . . But he is also 'l'élu des Nympthes de la Seine,' and, involuntarily, he somewhat disguises Hellenism with the finery affected by the humanists, and this gives a singular grace to the exquisite eclogue of Galatea, where the sober and powerful poetry of Theocritus is mingled with the pretty coquettices of the French pastoral and the excessively refined courtesy of the Renaissance elegies."

M. Anatole France has written in a similar strain:

"He [Moréas] has been nurtured on our old romances of chivalry, and he seems to wish to know the gods of ancient Greece only under the refined forms they assumed on the banks of the Seine and the Loire in the time of the *Pléiade*."

And Moréas loved the soil itself no less than the songs that sprang from it. He made himself not only a Frenchman, but a provincial, this amazing Greek, for whom patriotism was so purely a thing of the spirit that he could select his own fatherland and appropriate all its past for his own pride and uses. M. Rémy de Gourmont speaks of the Ile de France as that "province which M. Moréas has elected among all others, whose manners he adopted and which he loves perhaps more even than his native Greece." The same critic quotes the poet's saying that "the contemplation of the Seine and the repeated reading of the twenty-fourth canto of the Iliad are the best teachers of the sublime, by which I mean measure in strength." And again: "The day when I first loved the Seine, I understood why the gods had caused me to be born in Greece." One might almost believe that in this strange and ideal passion for the songs and the soil of an alien land there was the mysterious manifestation of a memory older than the individual; that in the veins of the Greek poet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there flowed an obscure strain of French blood from the days of the Fourth Crusade, when the followers of Villehardouin and Champlite overflowed the land of Hellas and founded their brilliant but ephemeral principalities of Athens and Achaia.

But if there was any such cross in the strain its presence is not recorded. Moréas, whose real name was Papadiamantopoulos, and who was born in Athens in 1856, was, according to the bio-

graphical notice in the latest edition of "*Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*," descended from two great families of Greece. His paternal grandfather died heroically at the siege of Missolonghi, while his mother's father, Tombazis, gained glory by burning the Turkish fleets. The father of the poet, who was still living in 1908, at an advanced age, was a distinguished jurist and an attorney-general. Other relations of the poet hold high places in the Greek army and parliament. Moréas received an education that was mainly French. He once said to the editor of a French paper:

"It was with your poets that I passed the happiest moments of my early youth. I read them constantly, and before I was ten years old I had already promised myself that I should sing like them on a French lyre. When, on the morrow of the war [Franco-Prussian] I left my country to come to France, I left at Athens a library of two thousand volumes, the works of almost all the poets of the Renaissance and of our best classic authors."

Like Maeterlinck, who also nourished his youth on French literature, Moréas was destined to the law, but while the obscure Gandois came to Paris to escape the career of a petty advocate, the Greek arrived there in accordance with his father's wishes that he should fit himself for the magistracy. "At Paris," he wrote, "I followed vaguely the course at the Ecole de Droit. . . . But I abandoned myself to the demon of poetry and frequented the artistic and literary circles of the Quartier Latin." Three years of this life determined his future as definitively as did the few months which Maeterlinck passed a little later in similar society on the left bank of the Seine. Henceforth it was as impossible for Moréas to live in Athens as it was for the Belgian poet to resume his quiet bourgeois existence in Ghent. He tried it for a brief period, then returned to Paris, and did not visit Greece again for twenty years, although in the mean time he had travelled extensively over the countries of central and southern Europe.

Moréas made his débüt as a writer in 1882 in a little journal, "*La Nouvelle Rive Gauche*," afterwards renamed "*Lutèce*." Verlaine had returned to Paris the year before, and M. Lepelletier, in his life of that poet, has told how the author of "*Fêtes Galantes*" and "*Sagesse*" gradually drew around him the group of young men who were seeking to revive the poetic movement which had been quiescent since the war and the Commune had

dispersed the Apollos of the "Parnasse"; and how he gave to them the gospel which they awaited, in the "*Art Poétique*," with its now famous doctrine:

" De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfère l'Impair
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose."

Moréas was one of this original band of *décadents*, and the influence of Verlaine, as well as of Baudelaire, is felt in his first collection of verse, "*Les Syrtes*," which appeared in 1884. This was followed in 1886 by a second, "*Les Cantilènes*," in which the ascendancy of another master, Mallarmé, is noted in the definite place accorded to symbols.

It was, indeed, in this year that the symbolist movement was formally started. A writer in the "*Temps*" had attacked "*Les Poètes Décadents*," and in the "*Figaro*" Moréas published a manifesto in which he defended the new tendencies, and proposed the substitution of the word symbolist for *décadent* as the official designation of the poets in whose work these tendencies declared themselves. At the same time, he began the publication of a paper thus styled with Gustave Kahn and Paul Adam as his collaborators. Differences of opinion developed early as to the importance of the place held by the symbol in the new aesthetic, some, notably Kahn, maintaining that metrical reforms were paramount, and that the "*vers libre*" was its distinguishing trait. But there can be little doubt that the symbol, or as we should say, rather, the image or the "*conceit*," however variously defined and interpreted, was the keynote of the new school. Stripped of its rather mystical and esoteric statement, symbolism as preached by Moréas was merely a plea for a type of poetic art at once more purely intellectual, more ideally imaginative than that which had obtained hitherto—a type of poetry suited to the requirements of an age which, nauseated by naturalism and disturbed by a vague spiritual unrest, was turning once more to German metaphysics, and finding in music its most intimate medium of artistic expression. An atmosphere of abstraction enveloped the minds of the young; the national disaster and the chaotic and unstable political conditions generated a disgust for life and prompted a pursuit of the ideal; the spirit of the Commune, still abroad, operated to bring about a certain lawlessness in fields

where there could be no repressions and reprisals, and where precious traditions of the past could be broken and abrogated with impunity. Exotic influences, exerted by growing attention to foreign literatures, by the very presence in Paris of representatives of these literatures, Belgian and American, with their fresh enthusiasms, newly awakened creative ardor and greater freedom from trammels of all kinds, also served to give impetus to the movement, to shape and define it. As formulated by Moréas, this movement opposed the Parnassian and naturalistic theory and practice principally upon the ground that these considered any given fact as existing poetically in itself. The symbolists themselves regarded the fact as poetically significant only in so far as it was capable of being employed, by virtue of the analogies discernible between all things, to clothe the pure idea and thus to interpret it to the imagination. The so-called "metaphysical" poets of the seventeenth century in England were thus symbolists, and Shelley, who, as the late Francis Thompson pointed out, was their continuator, was also a symbolist. And if the French symbolist sought to establish a veritable system of figurative expression, basing this system upon a metaphysical conception of analogies as an actual chain of relationships existing antecedent to and independent of the artist's perception of them, this must be attributed to the innate logical propensity of the French mind; while, if he loved to impart a tinge of mysticism to his aesthetic, to accord to his symbols a neo-Platonic or Swedenborgian scope and significance, this must, in turn, be explained in large measure as a momentary protest against that positivism which had so long limited the nineteenth-century man's outlook on life and sealed up in him all speculations concerning the unknown and the invisible.

As a matter of fact, there was very little of the symbolist in this mystical and esoteric sense in Moréas, even while he was the standard-bearer and theorician of the movement. As M. Beaunier points out, the majority of his so-called symbolical poems are merely "unexplained allegories whose interpretation is easy and plausible." Symbolism meant for him primarily what it also meant for his master Mallarmé, namely, a kind of rhetoric, the secret of whose acceptance in both instances lies in a deep-seated disgust conceived for the facile composition and the banal style of the poets who win the approbation of the crowd. Where

Moréas is obscure, therefore,—and he is hopelessly obscure at times,—his obscurity results less from the depth of subtlety of his thought than from a conscious effort to achieve perverse eccentricity for its own sake. At times, indeed, he is obscure from other causes, as, for example, from a youthful desire to experiment with the power of words and of symbols to suggest certain sentiments through their sounds and associations. Behind him, as behind nearly all the poets of this group, is divined the presence of Poe, whose subtle essays in this direction were eagerly imitated, and whose processes were applied with a supple perfection of art and a variety of precise and delicate evocation of which Poe himself never dreamed. In poetry of this type, whose verbal color and music is well suited to express otherwise inexpressible shades of feeling, Moréas excelled. Such poetry is necessarily obscure, since its appeal is wholly to the emotions. But obscurity is out of place in poetry dealing with ideas, and to cultivate it deliberately is a puerile affectation. It was, moreover, in the case of Moréas, an affectation wholly foreign to his real nature in which vigor and lucidity were combined with an Hellenic appreciation of plasticity and sensuous beauty. He was not a metaphysician, but an artist.

“He is obscure,” wrote Anatole France, “and one feels that he is not obscure naturally. On the contrary, he places his hand without hesitation upon the exact term, the clear image, the precise form. And yet he is obscure. He is so because he wishes to be so; and if he wishes it, it is because his æsthetic wishes it.”

Conscious himself of the inherent falsity of his position, Moréas soon completely discarded this æsthetic, and with a blithe egotism that was a characteristic of the man, hastened to declare that symbolism no longer existed since he had ceased to be a symbolist. In its place he proclaimed another school and published a third book of verse, “*Le Pèlerin Passioné*,” to illustrate its principles. This was the “*Ecole Romane*,” which has been the source of endless critical discussion and of much abuse of its founder by his old associates, who declared him a renegade and traitor. The purpose of this school was to re-establish the true tradition of French poetry which Moréas believed had been broken by Malherbe and the seventeenth century. In this belief he was principally swayed by linguistic considerations. Barrès called him “the grammarian poet,” and the description fits him, for he at-

tributed an overwhelming importance to the rôle of language, both syntax and diction, in poetry. Reacting from the Parnassian position that facts existed poetically in themselves, he virtually maintained the same of words and forms of expression, namely, that they are not merely the product, the vehicles, but the very sources, of the ideas and emotions which it is the function of poetry to express. Hence his growing indifference to symbols as such. Symbols exist in words. Syntax is symbolic. It is, therefore, idle to preach symbolism until we have enriched our vocabulary, rendered our grammatical construction more supple, so as to render the language itself symbolic to the very fullest extent.

Comparing the poets of the so-called classic ages, of the romantic period and of the present, Moréas was struck by the progressive impoverishment of the language since the attempts of Ronsard and Du Bellay to develop its resources. A wealth of admirable words had been allowed to become obsolete and syntax had grown rigid and conventional—*sans race*. Moréas conceived the idea of restoring the decrepit and anæmic language of the present by deliberately drawing upon the resources of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and continuing the work of the *Pléiade* in still further enlarging these by direct derivations from the Latin. As a mediævalist Moréas may be compared with William Morris, and perhaps the best way to gain an idea of the "*Ecole Romane*" and of Moréas's *chansons romans* is to imagine what the result would have been had the English poet carried his passion for archaism to the point of writing the "*Earthly Paradise*" in the very idiom of Chaucer. Had he done so, it will scarcely be believed that he would have won many readers, or that the language of to-day would have been really rejuvenated. Spenser, it is true, formed a special semi-Chaucerian diction for "*The Faery Queen*," but this is a slight matter compared with the proposals of Moréas; and besides, while, unquestionably, this tinge of archaism contributes to the charm of Spenser's naïve and languorous verse, it is by no means a main element in its strength and beauty. Also, it had no effect upon future productions. The Spenserian grace became completely attenuated in the school of Spenser, and both in that poet and in Shakespeare the wonderful enlargement of the verbal resources of the English language was due less to the deliberate attempt to forge a new instrument than to the inevitableness with which, in an age of intellectual and

emotional activity, this instrument shapes itself spontaneously in response to the new and increasing demands made upon its faculty of expression. Language is nothing apart from the mind that employs it normally as its unconscious idiom; and the only way in which a language can be naturally, and not artificially, enlarged and enriched is through some influx of new thoughts and new feelings. M. Beaunier has stated the conditions that govern such an experiment as that made by Moréas clearly and concisely when he says:

“If by a miraculous chance it happened that the language of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was exactly what our epoch needed such an attempt at resurrection would succeed. Otherwise not. Otherwise a resurrection of this character is a curious exercise of erudition—that is all.”

The failure of Moréas’s own experiment is placed beyond the question of a doubt by the verdict of the same critic—and, of course, it is only a French critic who can pass conclusively upon this point—that while not all the poems in the “*Pélerin Passioné*” are equally archaic, certain of them are utterly incomprehensible to any one who has not studied old French. Thus from the obscurity of rhetorical symbolism Moréas passed promptly to obscurity of another sort—the obscurantism of the scholar and linguistic expert. At the same time, he proposed certain reforms in versification of which it is unnecessary to say anything here, since the French system differs so radically from the English that the points involved are without special significance for us. Our prosody is already so free that attempts to free it still further, though such have been made by Robert Bridges and others, appear far-fetched and supererogatory. Any English poet may write practically as he pleases so long as he justifies the result to our ear. If anything, we enjoy too much freedom, and if any reform is needed at all it is one that will lead back to the practice of the poets from Waller to Pope. The rigidity of French metricism, bound down as it is by rules at every point, has, on the contrary, always very naturally led to revolts which are wholesome and necessary, since they are the one means of preventing French poetry from degenerating into that sheer formalism towards which it fatally tends. It is for this reason that Walt Whitman has exerted an influence far wider and more profound in France than in either England or America. For, whereas to us his shapeless

style is apt to appear merely slovenly, in France it has seemed an admirable example of "natural" poetry, a splendid symbol of revolt. Not Moréas, however, but, as we have said, another poet, Gustave Kahn stood principally sponsor for the "*vers libre*." The former simply coqueted with it for a time and finally abandoned it altogether, saying that he had perceived it to be "uniquely material and its effects illusory."

Moréas abandoned the "*Ecole Romane*" itself before long, for his convictions were in so constant a state of flux that no creed could remain permanently the expression of his ideas and purposes. The one thing that gives unity to this somewhat eccentric career of a poet perpetually in quest, is the idea of traditionalism that dominated him. He believed that there was a main tradition of French poetry from which the race had departed at some time, and that it was his business to discover this, to revive it and to carry it on for his age in his own poetry. Not finding it in romanticism or in such poets as Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, he had, as we have seen, travelled back up the centuries to those periods of the remote past when language and prosody were in their formative stages. But, as he said later: "My instinct was not slow in warning me that it was necessary to return to the true classicism and to true antiquity, as well as to the severest traditional versification." Thus the poet who formerly could not get enough of freedom suddenly turned about and subjected himself to a discipline of technique and imagination as severe as that inculcated by Malherbe and Boileau. The verses in the volume entitled "*Stances*" and all his subsequent work are of exquisite purity without a trace of archaism or affectation in the phrasing or in the diction, while the verse structure is absolutely regular both in the scansion of the line and in the arrangement of the rhymes. It is as though Donne or Cowley had in a moment taken to writing like Gray and at the first stroke succeeded in producing an "*Elegy*." These little poems of two and three stanzas each, in which complete yet voluntary restraint as to form echoes, and is allied imaginatively with a corresponding restraint in the expression, may, indeed, be more properly compared to the "*Elegy*" than to anything else in English poetry. Like it their language and their ideas are not of any one period, but are stamped with a certain universality. Both poets are artists in words, and their studies throughout the entire range

of their respective literatures chastened their style to a point where it may truly be called traditional—that is, it expresses the genius of the language with such purity that in ceasing to be representative of any one period it becomes representative of all periods. Like that of Gray, the philosophy of Moréas is pessimistic, not in the metaphysical German manner, but rather in the moral mood of antique stoicism. More personal than the English poet's, Moréas's verse contains fewer commonplaces of mortuary meditation and more glimpses of the poet's own soul. This element of spiritual autobiography makes the poems more interesting than the "Elegy" and helps to offset Gray's superiority in pictorial imagination.

Examined from the point of view of what they express, the "Stances" differ less from the poems that preceded them than they do in form. It is only the manner that has changed. The pessimism that arises from temperamental bias or intellectual scepticism and issues in indifference to life as such, while, doubtless, time deepened it by adding disappointment to disillusion, underlies all of Moréas's work from the beginning and is implied even when it is not expressed in so many words. Life was for him always "*l'exécrable vie*," and the idealism of symbolism and *décadence* for him, as for his fellows of these schools, represented an attempt to escape from the ugly and commonplace realities of this world into a dream world of his own. That is one reason—perhaps the main reason—why both Morris and Moréas persisted in seeing antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Viewed thus, its unreality—the unreality of nymphs and river gods, sirens and sylvans—becomes still more fantastic and affords a still readier release for the mind through the imagination. Morris presented himself to his generation as "the idle singer of an empty day"; and just as he asks with an infinite sense of the shadowiness of human things, "what sorrow can outlast a little song?" so Moréas proclaimed it as the function of poetry

"A couvrir de beauté la misère du monde."

This mood merely condenses itself more specifically in the "Stances" and assumes the graver, weightier and more positive expression of maturity. The secret of the stoical acceptance and restraint, the contentment with apparent realities in place of

the *paradis artificiels* with which youth sought to drug itself, all arise from the growing conviction that life itself is but a dream—or less.

“ Ne dites pas: la vie est un joyeux festin;
Ou c'est d'un esprit sot ou c'est d'une ame basse.
Surtout ne dites point: elle est malheur sans fin,
C'est d'un mauvais courage et qui trop tôt se lasse.

“ Riez comme au printemps s'agitent les rameaux,
Pleurez comme la bise ou le flot sur la grève,
Goûtez tous les plaisirs et suffrez tous les maux
Et dites: c'est beaucoup et c'est l'ombre d'un rêve.”

This is often called a decadent philosophy, but it is a philosophy in which great minds have shared, and it comes close to the thought of two poets as different from each other in other respects as Calderon and Shakespeare.

Moréas's last work was a tragedy, “ *Iphigénie*,” based directly upon the classical model of Racine. This was given in 1903 at the Théâtre d'Orange, and subsequently at several other theatres in France and abroad, including the Odéon at Paris and the Théâtre Royal at Athens—the last performance affording a fitting consummation for the career of a poet who began by abjuring the divinities of his own Olympus for those of the Seine, and who ended by blending the spirit of two classics—that of Euripides and that of Racine.

WILLIAM ASPENWALL BRADLEY.